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Open CIA panels to public: Senator

It's not all secret, he says

By James O'Shea

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WASHINGTON—The new chairman of the supersecret Senate Intelligence Committee said Wednesday that he was confident the committee could hold a few public hearings to help "sow the seeds" of public understanding of the spy business.

"Clearly, intelligence must operate with the greatest degree of secrecy possible to preserve the secrecy of sources and methods," said Sen. David Durenberger [R., Minn.] after his first meeting as chairman of the panel that rides herd on the Central Intelligence Agency's budget.

"But there are some aspects of the process which might usefully be discussed a bit more openly," he said. "I am confident that, if handled with discretion and with an absolute commitment to avoid making comment simply for the sake of comment, a few public meetings of this committee could help sow the seeds needed for the growth of long-term public understanding."

The committee deals with many sensitive subjects, and Durenberger didn't specify what areas he would like to deal with in public hearings.

But in a separate statement, Sen. Patrick Leahy [D., Vt.], the new vice chairman of the committee, said during the next year the committee would deal with issues ranging from the CIA's well-publicized "covert war" in Nicaragua to such supersensitive areas as the adequacy of procedures to verify Soviet compliance with arms-control agreements.

"We will be expected to make a judgment for the Senate and ultimately for the entire government on the verifiability of any arms agreement. We cannot just wait until the President presents a treaty for ratification. The committee must follow the evolution of proposals at every step of the way, injecting its views at the time so the President can take them into account," Leahy said.

The committee has held public hearings in the past but only on legislation that it was seeking, a committee source said. It has not held hearings on intelligence matters, the source said, and he didn't understand what intelligence issues Durenberger referred to in his statement. "No matter what," he said, "classified information is classified information and can't be disclosed in public."

One issue that is expected to be aired in public is any administration request for funds to aid the Nicaraguan contras—about 12,000 to 15,000 rebels trying to topple the leftist Sandinista government in Managua.

Both Durenberger and Leahy indicated after an organizational meeting that the committee would try to dump the issue of Nicaragua into the laps of others.

In an interview, Durenberger said that so much has already been made public about the CIA's aid to the contras that the "covert war" is no longer a secret. He said its status makes it a proper subject for foreign policy, which could place the issue before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Leahy, too, said that Nicaragua no longer "fits into the normal mode" of the Intelligence Committee. "It has become a major foreign policy issue for the Senate and the whole country," said Leahy, an opponent of aid to the rebels.

Both Durenberger and Leahy said the Intelligence Committee's first order of business would be to deal with the administration's intelligence budget.

But Leahy said he and other Democrats on the committee are interested in several other areas, such as terrorism, the hardships or dangers faced by intelligence agents and problems with special operations, such as the Green Berets.